DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 227 489 CS 207 391

AUTHOR Melchior, Bonnie
TITLE Shedding Tears Over Milton.
PUB DATE [82]
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Descriptions; English Instruction; English Literature; Figurative Language; Higher Education; *Instructional Innovation; *Language Usage; *Literature Appreciation; *Seventeenth Century Literature; Syntax; *Teacher Role; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Milton (John); Paradise Lost

ABSTRACT

An English instructor at the University of Central Arkansas observed three problems students encounter with the often formidable writings of John Milton and developed strategies for alleviating those problems. The first problem was the difficulty posed by the vocabulary and syntax of "Paradise Lost." The instructor discussed with the class syntactic clues that would allow them to manipulate Milton's poetry into a more conventional syntactic order. They also discussed roots, prefixes, and suffixes to give the class a better understanding of Milton's unfamiliar Latinate vocabulary. The second major problem stemmed from the fact that the students lacked the background needed to give the work a meaningful context. The instructor gave the students a focus they could deal with--the question of who in fact was the hero of "Paradise Lost"--and then supplied the historical background as needed. The third and most difficult problem had to do with aesthetics--what makes Milton worth reading. By having students bring their own values and preconceptions to the hero question, the instructor hoped they would see how a great work makes a coherent statement of depth and complexity, and how Milton's choices in diction and style influenced their expectations and responses. At the end of the semester, the students admitted that it had been difficult, but that they had come a long way in developing a sense of what makes a great work great. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED227489

Dr. Bonnie Melchior
Department of English
University of Central Arkansas
Conway, AR. 72032

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Bonnie Melchior
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Shedding Tears Over Milton

Dr. Bonnie Melchior

Milton has always been considered sublime, but now he is in danger of being sublimed into thin air. He has the reputation with students of being so formidable and remote that it takes an English Department several years to collect a class of ten. Milton is not suffering this fate alone. He has good company: "Chaucer," "Wordsworth," and even "Shakespeare" are becoming every-other-semester or even every-other-year courses. Last year, when I taught a graduate/upper division class in Milton, I first realized the scope of the problem. Students literally could not read the words and make meaningful sentences out of them. Even if they could, they lacked a context for the text. Those who succeeded in surmounting both these obstacles still had difficulty: They wanted to be "notetaking bystanders to the reading process, and they therefore missed encountering the work as an aesthetic communication, despite having overcome the earlier reading difficulties. I would like to describe these three problems in more detail and propose some tentative strategies.

The first problem was that students literally could not "read" a Miltonic text such as Paradise Lost. Both the vocabulary and the syntax caused them difficulty. When they attempted to read the invocation and had to wait until line 6 for the first verb, they looked as if they felt more damned than Satan. One student said that he had never read any Old English before and perhaps that was why he was having difficulty. This artless remark launched us into a brief discussion of the history of English, during which it came out that only half

CS210739

the students had had a course (other than "Survey") in literature written prior to 1700. I distributed excerpts from "The Lord's Prayer" (in Old English), Canterbury Tales, Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, Byron's Manfred, and of course PL to demonstrate how the language had changed.

Since they were intimidated by the combination of Milton's difficult vocabulary and unusual syntax, I set about demonstrating that as native speakers of English, they had considerable expertise in picking up syntactic clues and performing transformations. I put on the board some jabberwocky and some commonplace sentences that had been transformed in typically Miltonic ways. They had no problem understanding "Him the wolf ate" and "Of the meaning understand I nothing." We discussed what clues enabled them to sort the sentences into natural order. We covered Milton's forward placement of direct objects and prepositional phrases, his freer use of connectives like "nor", his interruption of key clause elements, and so forth. I paired the simple modern sentences with PL quotes. After tackling the modern examples, they began to feel more confident about performing similar manipulations on Milton's poetry. They found, when a line confused them, that they could transform it into natural order to get the meaning, whereas they usually could not analyze it grammatically. We read the first 50 lines of PL in class and put any difficult-to-understand lines in more mundane syntactic order.

The students also had trouble with the unfamiliar Latinate vocabulary. It is too bad those 365-New Words-A-Year calendars weren't flooding the market ten years ago. I handed out lists of roots, prefixes, and suffixes. To demonstrate how many of these they knew, I had them coin new words and translate each other's creations. They had fun making up atrocities like "capuclast," and "ludidiction," and they gained a sense of words as the sums of roots. They were better able to figure out the meaning of some words in the text they did not know, and they were

less disturbed by Milton's coinages (such as "Pandemonium") and his tendency to use a word as the sum of its roots instead of in its modern sense (for instance, the vast "interrupt").

The second major problem the students faced also stemmed from inadequate background experience. When they finally deciphered the words on the page, they lacked a context that would make those words meaningful. Over half the class had never read an epic and did not know who Oliver Cromwell was. How much less intimidating this most learned of writers would have been if everyone had read The Book of Job, The Aeneid, The Fairy Queen, and Ben Jonson's masques. On the other hand, even if students had done this reading, they would still not know the Eikon Basilike and hermeneutics. The students felt their ignorance upon them. It made them so insecure that they interrupted every line with a glance at the footnotes and thus lost their train of thought. I urged them, unless they could not follow the sense at all, to look only when they finished the page.

The most important help they needed with regard to context was some way to relate PL to their own experience and knowledge. Without such a bridge, they were responding to the work as a curio rather than a communication. I decided to give them a focus they felt competent to deal with, then supply historical background as questions from the readings arose. The focus was "Who is the hero of PL?" Satan? God? Christ? Adam? This question drew on their present value systems concerning what is admirable and good, but also necessitated examining the structure and wording of the work and Milton's background. At various points then, students asked for information concerning Milton's politics or religion. As a result, we read "Of Education" and "Areopagitica" during Book III (also Ulysses' speech on degree from Troilus and Cressida). During Books V and VI we read "The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates" and compared

Vaughan's concept of Christ in "The Nativity" with Milton's in "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity." Two students got so interested in Milton's view of sin and God that they read quite a bit of De doctrina Christiana.

The third problem the students had was least obvious to them and therefore most dangerous. It had to do with aesthetics, with what makes Milton worth reading and worth teaching in a college curriculum. The focus "Who is the hero of PL?" helped me deal with this problem also. The problem was that the students' expectations of what they were there to learn did not match mine. What they expected to learn of Milton during this course reminded me of what Mr. Gradgrind's students found out about a horse:

> "Quadruped. Gramnivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye teeth, and twelve incisors. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries sheds hoofs too. Hoofs are hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth."... "Now girl number twenty," Mr. Gradgrind announced..."you know what a horse is." (Dickens, Hard Times)

From the empty look in the students' eyes and from the intent way they were grasping their pens, I rather thought they expected me to begin enumerating Milton's eye teeth and the marshy metaphors in Book I. Then they would know what Milton is. I asked them why Milton is considered a great writer and they answered that he is great because his works contain noble ideas and because they have things like metaphors and caesuras in them. I wanted to break down this delusion of "container" as separate from contents and try to present Milton as a "way of experiencing" (Kenneth Burke, Counterstatement [Berkely: University of California Press, 1968] , p. 143). I wanted these students to develop an aesthetic awareness of what constitutes a great work. René Wellek define a great work as one that completely assimilates the materials into the forms. It continues to be admired because "its aesthetic value is so rich and comprehensive as to include among its structures one or more which

gives satisfaction to each later period" (Theory of Literature [New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1956], pp. 231, 233). This conception demands that a reader experience the work and that he sense the form as part of the communication. I hoped that having students focus on the question of who is the hero, a question to which they brought their own values and preconceptions, would help them see how a great work makes a coherent statement of depth and complexity. I planned to have them examine Milton's choices in diction, rhythm, imagery, order, and even genre, and discuss how these choices influenced their expectations and responses and how the choices accumulated to produce a coherent and complete definition of heroism.

The idea that style is choice was new to the students. They had had no critical theory. Criticism courses, when offered as electives, fill even more slowly than Milton classes. Without some grounding in theory, however, students analyze or enumerate without knowing why they are doing so. Such procedures encourage a sense that "good style" is something that can exist apart from content. The students expected to admire Milton's organ tones and patronize his outmoded ideas. Much critical ink in this century has been expended in an effort to counter the view that style is decoration. Stanley Fish, for example, emphasizes the importance of the reader's response in making stylistic judgements. He says,

> ...the significance of [a writer's patterns or choices]... is a function of their reception and negotiation by a reader who comes upon them already oriented in the direction of specific concerns and possessed of (or by) certain expectations ("What is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?" Approaches to Poetry (Selected Papers from the English Institute), ed. Seymour Chatman [New York: Columbia University Press, 1973], p. 143.)

A student, then, should bring his own experience to the work and consider how the work operates on these experiences and preconceptions. The forms

themselves are semiotic structures and convey meaning. Richard Ohmann is another critic who relates the idea of the author's choice to the reader's response:

> [Although] the writer's own tongue sets boundaries, an infinite number of meaningful choices remain to be made ("Prolegomena to the Analysis of Prose Style," Essays on the Language of Literature, eds. Seymour Chatman and Samuel Levin [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967], p. 405)
>
> These choices are important for they are the critic's key to the writer's mode of experience. They show what sort of place the world is for him,...what parts of it are significant or trivial (p. 408).
>
> [Any] given sentence acquires part of its meaning by resonating against...unwritten alternatives. ("Literature as Sentences," in Essays, p. 233)

What Ohmann says of choices at the sentence level applies also to larger unit choices (of genre and plot, for instance). Fish, for example, notes the relation between the author's choice of genre and the reader's response. He says, "a description of a genre...can and should be seen as a prediction of the shape of the response" (p. 151).

My strategy concerning the aesthetics problem was to rely on the focus question "Who is the hero of PL?" to force students to bring their own concerns and expectations to this work. They were to answer the question by examining Milton's choices at all levels: choice of genre, of sequence, of imagery, and of syntax; choice in the way major characters express themselves. In order to evaluate these choices, students had to start with their own expectations. I hoped that the examination would produce the revelation that choices in art are coherent: they add up to a complex and significant perspective on the subject. The great artist anticipates our expectations and then satisfies them completely yet not quite predictably. I wanted people to put down the list of incisors and ride the horse.

We started by examining their expectations regarding the major characters. The whole class, a group of regular churchgoers, was against Satan. They assumed he was to be the villain and Adam or Christ the hero. They said, in fact, that it would be impossible to think of Satan as heroic. One member, however, startled everyone, herself included, by saying that Satan talked like a general she admired (Patton) and that if everyone weren't so prejudiced, perhaps they would all admire him. This stimulated a vigorous discussion, especially when everyone realized that Milton had the same Christian heritage to bias him. They were interested that critics argued over the same question; they read Blake, Shelley, Waldock, Tillyard, and Lewis. They traced how their own response to Satan changed in subsequent books, finding that the political maneuverer of Book II appealed to them less and the sneering ironist of V and VI still less. It is hard to dodge mountains with dignity.

The students found Milton's Christ as surprising as his Satan. Their first inclination was to see the son of God as the mild, gentle-faced brunette of Bible-story books. The Book VI Christ in his chariot with burning wheels disturbed this conception. Could it be the meek Christ who says, "Whom thou hat'st, I hate, and can put on thy terrors as I put thy mildness on" (VI. 734-5) and "I through the ample air in triumph high shall lead Hell captive maugre Hell...ruin all my Foes, Death last, and with his carcass glut the grave" (III. 254-59)? Yet the narrator himself calls Christ "meek" at this point. The students were interested in the critical issue of the unreliable narrator and also in learning that Milton had two traditions from which to draw his Christ. He could choose either the familiar gentle and human Counter-Reformation Christ or the severe Reformation Christ. They compared "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," with Vaughan's "The Nativity," which presents a savior who "travels to be born and then is born to travail."

They concluded that Milton had chosen to emphasize Satan's human side and to de-emphasize Christ's. I restrained them from leaping to the conclusion that therefore Satan is more admirable. We looked at other evidence, for example the sequencing.

We considered how their attitude toward Satan was affected by beginning in medias res instead of with the heavenly battle. Beginning in Hell with Satan and hearing his magnificent speech induced an initial suspension of the prejudice they felt. They found the sudden shift in perspective between Book II and Book III shocking. I pointed out that Milton controls the chronology so as to present many interesting pairs (for example, the Council in Hell and that in Heaven; Satan and Christ both volunteering for a terrible task; Satan seducing the angels and then, shortly after, Eve; Satan soliloquizing from his despair in Book IV and Adam doing the same in Book X). Examining these contrasts helped them understand Milton's vision of good and evil and find out more about their own. It amazed them that Milton used features imposed on him by his genre (for example, starting in medias res) to help him define the issues involved and to influence their response as readers.

We also looked at the metaphors and images to see how these influenced their response. They found that these, like the contrasting pairs, reduced Satan's heroism. Evaluating the light imagery helped them pull together the whole heroism and good-evil question. Throughout the work, light was identified with abundance, glory, communion. It was a personal, physical need in the Book III invocation; a sign of Platonic truth and the ability to see values, proportions and relationships in Books I, II, and III; a sign of communion and grandeur throughout (as seen in the dimming of Satan, Adam, and Eve); and a sign of creation and God in Book VII. In one image, Satan is strikingly presented as a sunspot: His is the darkness of negation, isolation, and spite.

When we considered Milton's choice of genre, I brought up the fact that he had earlier considered writing a tragedy. Those students who had read epics discussed the expectations they had concerning epic heroism, epic deeds, and the relationship of the epic hero to the society. Others discussed medieval vice figures and the tradition of amoral or immoral tragic heroes in Renaissance drama, such as Tamburlaine and Macbeth. At the end of the semester, one student decided that a tragedy would have made the story more "private" (a tale of one man's fallibility). It is true that tragedy is a public form and that the tragic hero is a man of stature, but the epic is a still more public form and it presents the hero as a representative of his culture. Some students said the public, ritual elements of the form gave the work a religious and communal dimension similar to the reading of scripture before a congregation. On the other hand, they felt Milton had countered this aspect of the form in some ways, for example with a suspect narrator. Despite the"public" genre, Milton made the work surprisingly intimate. They agreed they felt like Stanley Fish's beleaguered reader. At first, they had considered themselves immune in their superior knowledge. The brilliant spectacle and rhetoric of Book I, however, lured them into seeing Satan as a hero down against the odds. Having seduced them into sympathy, the work continued to make them accomplices while at the same time driving toward a dramatic recognition of the nature of good and evil. The subject no longer appeared remote; they recognized these characters from their own experience. Belial's advocacy of sloth and cowardice masked as highminded stoicism, Eve's rationalization that she is offering Adam the apple all for love, or Satan's assertion that necessity drives him on--they had heard it before over dinner or at work or on the news. The language and epic conventions seemed formal and distancing, but the psychological interplay between Adam and Eve on the fatal morning was intimately everyday. The

into the work in the prayer for light added to their sense of intimacy. The work for them had both a public and a private dimension.

When, at the end of the semester, the class finished reading Paradise Lost, they found that they had in a way arrived back at their original position; they scorned Satan. They had, however, come some distance in developing a sense of what makes a great work great. It amazed them that so many choices at so many levels cohered and presented a unified vision to them. Even the syntax that had so troubled them contributed something. For example, they decided that "Him the Almighty hurled headlong" emphasized force and movement more than "the Almighty hurled him headlong," both because the stresses are more evenly distributed and because the syntax emphasizes "did what?" more than "Did it how or where?" Despite the agonies of syntax and vocabulary, of groping for a context, and of questioning and noting choices everywhere, the class seemed to prefer riding the horse to cataloguing its features. At the end of the semester, they gave me a box of hard candy inscribed, "Thank you. It's been hell." I was touched. Milton deserves non-passive readers who commit themselves to the communication process. I think he would agree with Stanley Fish that "human beings at every moment create the experiential spaces into which a personal knowledge flows " (p. 149), only Milton said it better:

> Truth is...a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. ("Areopagitica," JM: Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Hughes [New York: Odyssey Press, 1957], p. 739).